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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION UNITES BEHIND CARACAS MAYORAL
CANDIDATE; STILL DIVIDED IN MANY RACES

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶11. (C) Summary. Opposition parties named Alianza Bravo Pueblo (ABP) leader Antonio Ledezma September 9 their consensus candidate for the Caracas mayorship. Ledezma also picked up the personal endorsement of Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez, who had led early polls in the same race, but whom the Comptroller declared ineligible to run for office. The opposition still remains divided in many other races, including the mayoral contests for three of Caracas' five boroughs and in three gubernatorial races. At the same time, in many races in which the opposition has united behind consensus candidates, independent candidates threaten to siphon off would-be opposition votes and play the role of spoilers. Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and other pro-government parties are also still divided on state and local candidacies, but the PSUV, thanks in large part to its access to government coffers, is in a better position than opposition parties to win. End Summary.

Opposition Unites Behind Ledezma for Caracas Mayor

¶12. (SBU) At a poorly organized September 9 press conference, opposition parties announced their consensus support for Alianza Bravo Pueblo (ABP) leader Antonio Ledezma in the Caracas mayoral race. Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) mayoral candidate William Ojeda formally announced that he was withdrawing from the race just prior to Ledezma's remarks, and Chacao Mayor and former mayoral candidate Leopoldo Lopez endorsed Ledezma immediately following Ledezma's remarks. Lopez led all contenders in public opinion polls, but the Comptroller included him on a list of 272 current and former public officials declared ineligible to run for office based on administrative sanctions.

¶13. (C) Ledezma is a vocal critic of President Chavez, but in his remarks, he focused on Caracas' many municipal problems, including crime, poor trash collection, and traffic. Ledezma was the appointed governor of Caracas when the Venezuelan capital was a federal district under the previous Constitution. He is running against former Education Minister and former Libertador Borough Mayor Aristobulo Isturiz, one of the most prominent United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) leaders. While opposition leaders insist Ledezma can win the Caracas mayorship, some opposition parties delayed supporting his candidacy because they did not believe he could defeat Isturiz.

Opposition Still Divided in Many Places

¶4. (C) The opposition is still divided in three of Caracas' five borough races. In Chacao, Mayor Lopez's protégé Councilman Emilio Grateron continues to square off against the candidate of his own UNT party, Liliana Hernandez. In El Hatillo, the UNT and AD continue to field competing candidates. UNT National Political Director Luis Emilio Rondon told PolCounts September 10 that the opposition can win both Chacao and El Hatillo with multiple candidates, and he does not expect consensus candidates in those districts. UNT leaders concede that residual infighting presents a negative image of the opposition as a whole, but stress that it is not always possible to forge compromises. In addition, the opposition has not yet agreed on a consensus candidate in the Libertador Borough of Caracas, a pro-Chavez stronghold.

¶5. (C) While opposition parties have announced consensus candidates in 19 of 22 gubernatorial races so far, not all opposition politicians are honoring those agreements and may prove to be spoilers. For example, in Miranda State, the Comptroller declared former governor and leading candidate Enrique Mendoza ineligible to run based on administrative sanctions. Mendoza has so far refrained from endorsing Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles Radonski, the opposition's next-best candidate, and appears to be tacitly supporting the independent candidacy of another former governor. San Francisco Mayor Saadi Bijani continues to run an independent gubernatorial campaign in Zulia against consensus opposition candidate Pablo Perez.

¶6. (C) Parties may reach consensus on candidates up until

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September 15, although individual candidates may still withdraw their candidacies just days before the elections (although in the latter case their names would still appear on the ballot). The opposition plans to hold a primary at the end of September to decide on a consensus candidate for the Tachira gubernatorial race, a state the opposition could win if it is united. In Bolivar state, another state the opposition hopes to win, two former governors continue to run as competing opposition candidates. In Yaracuy State, the opposition remains divided between two candidates, including an ex-governor who is living in exile in Peru who is likely to be declared ineligible to run.

¶6. (C) Opposition leaders claim that they have now forged consensus candidacies in some 280 of 328 mayoral races and say they expect to win over 150 mayorships, including most of the state capitals and many of the largest cities. Local leaders, however, tell us that the opposition is still having difficulties reaching consensus candidates at the municipal level and coalition slates for legislative assembly elections. A Primero Justicia (PJ) leader from Monagas told Poloff that AD currently has four of the state's 11 mayorships, with only one AD mayor eligible and running for re-election. He said that because AD has so far spurned compromises with other parties, the opposition is likely to retain only one, if any, of the four mayorships it controls now.

Comment

¶7. (C) President Chavez's PSUV party is also confronting internal divisions and dissident candidacies, but the PSUV enjoys much more significant political and economic support than any of the opposition parties. Opposition leaders are accentuating the positive impact of the consensus candidacies that they have achieved, but they can ill afford continued divisions and the corresponding negative public image. The

opposition is more organized than ever before, but unfortunately, all too many opposition politicians, despite their conviction that President Chavez is an autocrat, continue to put their egos and personal ambitions ahead of their stated objective of expanding democratic space in Venezuela. End Comment.

CAULFIELD